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### Jazz's Attempt to Redefine Black Femininity

The 1920s were a profoundly transformative era as Americans were developing a new social, cultural, and political consciousness in the wake of WWI and these changing sensibilities can largely be analyzed within the context of jazz music. African American communities rose to new prominence through the popularity of jazz, but, for black women in particular, this music was not as liberating as some scholars suggest. Hazel Carby's work is one such example of this tendency to generalize the entertainment industry as a vehicle for black female empowerment, without acknowledging the continuing ramifications of how these women were marketed to their audiences. Contrastingly, Erin Chapman argues that while performing constituted an accessible alternative to the service work that many blues women once believed they were destined to, the ways in which jazz music was promoted and performed further perpetuated stereotypes regarding the hypersexuality and inferiority of black women. Bessie Smith is one notable example of how these women occupied a contradictory position in the jazz industry as they celebrated a newfound sense of selfhood within the domain of their exotic, primitive appeal to white consumers. Ultimately, the performance work of blues women during the 1920s was still, to a certain extent, service work as the entertainment industry made them a commodity to be sold and consumed; thus, jazz music granted black women some personal autonomy and freedom, but failed to liberate them from white society's assumptions and expectations of blackness.

Hazel Carby's piece classifies jazz as an avenue through which black women found personal and public empowerment; however, the optimism embedded within her argument largely fails to illustrate the social and political consequences of the performance industry as it stood in the 1920s. According to Carby, Bessie Smith's "Young Woman's Blues" is a declaration of pride in one's sexual identity, regardless of the public scrutiny or backlash that one would undoubtedly receive (Carby 20). Smith directly addresses her unwillingness to marry and instead asserts that "I'm [Smith] a young woman and ain't done running around." Carby interprets these lyrics as a message of defiance against the sexist conventions associated with femininity, particularly black femininity. She claims that female performers unabashedly celebrated their bodies to reclaim "...female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire" (Carby 20). Performing was not only a viable career option for black women, but it more importantly provided an escape from the drudgery of service work. It was within the domestic sphere that black women found no hope of social or economic advancement and the increasing popularity of jazz among both white and black audiences allowed these women to achieve newfound visibility (Lecture, "Blues Women and their Music").

However, underscoring the majority of "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues" is the claim that black women's outward embrace of their sex appeal, gender identity, and sexual orientation is a testament to the power they gained through participation in jazz spaces. While centers of jazz in the northern United States, such as Harlem and Chicago, more eagerly encouraged new definitions of sexuality and womanhood, black women continued to be subjugated to domestic violence, abuse, and other dangers of urban life (Lecture, "Blues Women and their Music"). The majority of African Americans migrated northward under the assumption that economic opportunity and social mobility was more readily

available in these emerging industrial, urban cities. For black women in particular, this sentiment of hope and promise manifested in jazz and thus the industry became emblematic of a new age of feminism and social progress, as Carby details. However, this broad classification fails to take into consideration the sexism and racism embedded within the entertainment industry itself.

Carby provides multiple examples of how blues women were marketed in advertisements, all of which use minstrel images of black women that accentuate their sex appeal and largely portray them as objects for consumption. These depictions are not liberating or empowering in the way that Carby suggests; rather, blues women were rapidly made into a commodity by an expanding consumer marketplace. Although jazz spaces did enable black women to actively participate in creating their own identities, the entertainment industry continued to represent them as degradingly stereotypical - a point that Carby largely neglects to address.

Contrastingly, Erin Chapman's work *Prove It On Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s* provides a much more comprehensive perspective of how the jazz industry impacted the social, political, and economic status of black women in America. Specifically in the chapter "Consuming the New Negro: The Whirlpools of the Sex-Race Marketplace," Chapman more critically analyzes how notions of primitivism played an undeniable role in the way jazz and blues women were marketed to mainly white consumer populations. Primitivism signifies an affinity for non-Western or minority cultures motivated by the belief that these peoples maintained a natural, unrepressed quality that was missing from an increasingly mechanical Western society (Lecture, "Jazz, Whiteness, and Americanness"). This rhetoric was very much ingrained into mainstream American popular culture and thus, jazz advertisements, venues, and oftentimes the music itself reflected the idea that blackness was alluring because it was exotic. Seduction was a highly lucrative marketplace, particularly for black women who

otherwise had minimal options for employment and thus the jazz industry transformed, via the various intersections between sex and race, from an expression of African American identity and ancestry to a hypersexualized commodity (Chapman 82). In order to maintain relevancy and popular appeal, jazz musicians and performers were forced to cater to white expectations of blackness, despite this undermining the progressive work taking place in black communities (Lecture 4, "Roots and Routes II"). The portrayals of blues women in mainstream media continued to deny them autonomy or agency and worked to strengthen the white majority's belief that black women were exclusively primitive, exotic, and sexual beings (Chapman 20).

Nevertheless, this piece continually stresses how "It was the blueswoman's job to manipulate the sex-race marketplace, to navigate its exploitative powers as long and as successfully as she could" (Chapman 107); meaning that black women did not consider themselves to be the victims of this system, rather they attempted to utilize their sudden visibility in the public sphere as a means of social uplift. A personal sense of power was derived from the developing strength of black communities and this sentiment is exemplified in the music and persona of Bessie Smith. She proudly says "I ain't no high yellow, I'm a deep killer brown," which not only reflects a new racial consciousness that was emerging in this era, but also her desire to publicly embrace all facets of her identity, particularly those that were considered taboo by mainstream conservative America, such as sexual displays not designed for the male gaze. "Young Woman's Blues" epitomizes how black women were attempting to formulate their identities within the larger context of the sex-race marketplace and thus, these emerging personas were never free from this influence (Chapman 112). Blues women "...understood themselves to be caught in its [the marketplace's] rapids - misrepresented within the discourse shaping the racial and sexual politics of their early twentieth-century world" (Chapman 113) and yet refused

to allow these labels to entirely dictate their new personal and public sensibilities. Despite the newfound social and economic freedom that black women gained through their participation in the jazz sphere, their supposed liberation was largely contained within these communities and is therefore a testament to the limited capacity of jazz music to tangibly transform black lives.

The United States underwent a tremendous amount of transformation during the 1920s and the emergence of the consumer marketplace had a profound impact on all those who participated in its many facets, namely black women who found new career paths in jazz performance. Northern cities changed dramatically from rapid urbanization and technological developments, both of which enabled jazz to grow in popularity and influence. The black women that eagerly participated in these spaces of cultural, racial, and political discussion found what many believed to be liberation; however, jazz music quickly became an industry that commodified blues women using racist and sexist notions of their primitive, exotic sexuality to appeal to white consumers. As a result, arguments like the one offered by Hazel Carby, which claim that blues women had successfully liberated themselves from male objectification and other societal constraints, are unfounded as they fail to address how stereotypical understandings of black women were reinforced by this market. Erin Chapman, on the other hand, offers a more holistic depiction of the jazz industry in the 1920s as black women were actively creating individual identities, but within the grasp of white expectations of black people. Strong, powerful personas, like the one embodied by Bessie Smith, are not only a testament to some of the origins of black feminism in America, but also to the power contained within this music and its potential to challenge the ideology of white supremacy moving forward.